

Message Text

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64

ACTION ARA-17

INFO OCT-01 ADP-00 CIAE-00 DODE-00 PM-07 H-02 INR-10 L-03

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INT-08 AID-20 PC-04 NIC-01 EUR-25 OPR-02 SY-10 RSR-01

/153 W

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R 292245 Z MAY 73

FM AMEMBASSY GUATEMALA

TO SECSTATE WASHDC 9850

INFO CINCSO

AMEMBASSY MANAGUA

AMEMBASSY PANAMA

AMEMBASSY SAN JOSE

AMEMBASSY SAN SALVADOR

AMEMBASSY TEGUCIGALPA

LIMITED OFFICIAL USE GUATEMALA 2568

E. O.11652: GDS

TAGS: PINT

SUBJECT: LAND DISPUTE IN JALAPA/ EL PROGRESO MOUNTAIN AREA LEAVES

17 DEAD

SUMMARY: A LONG SMOLDERING LAND DISPUTE BETWEEN CAMPESINOS IN A REMOTE MOUNTAIN AREA ALONG THE BORDER BETWEEN THE DEPARTMENTS OF JALAPA AND EL PROGRESO RESULTED IN A CLASH BETWEEN ONE OF THE CONTENDING CAMPESION GROUPS AND A UNIT OF TEN MILITARY POLICEMEN (MPMA). CONFLICT WHICH TOOK PLACE ON MAY 26 RESULTED IN DEATH OF 6 PMA' S AND 11 CAMPESINOS. ARMY UNITS UNDER LEADERSHIP OF CHIEF OF STAFF MOVED IN QUICKLY, SAW THAT FURTHER VIOLENCE UNLIKELY AND HAVE LARGELY WITHDRAWN. AREA NOW CALM . WHILE DISPUTE NOT POLITICALLY MOTIVATED, IT DOES HAVE POLITICAL IMPLICATIONS. END SUMMARY

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1. A LONG SMOLDERING LAND DISPUTE BETWEEN CAMPESINOS IN REMOTE MOUNTAIN AREA ALONG BORDER BETWEEN DEPARTMENTS OF JALAPA AND EL PROGRESO RESULTED IN ARMED CONFLICT BETWEEN ONE OF THE CONTENDING CAMPESINO GROUPS AND A DETACHMENT OF MILITARY POLICE (PMA) SENT TO BRING ORDER TO SITUATION.

2. BACKGROUND AND DETAILS OF CONFLICT, WHICH TOOK PLACE MAY 26, ARE, AND ARE LIKELY TO REMAIN, SOMEWHAT OBSCURE. BEST WE CAN TELL AT THIS POINT, DISPUTE SEEMS TO INVOLVE ABOUT 700 ACRES OF LARGELY UNPRODUCTIVE COMMUNAL MOUNTAIN LAND WHICH HAS BEEN USED BY CAMPESINOS FROM EL PROGRESO DURING RECENT YEARS, WHILE JALAPA CAMPESINOS CLAIMED LAND WAS TRADITIONALLY AND RIGHTFULLY THEIRS. AFTER SERIES OF THREATS AND HARRASSMENTS INCLUDING BURNOUTS BY JALAPA GROUP SEEKING GAIN REPOSSESSION, ARMY SENT A DETACHMENT OF 10 MILITARY POLICEMEN LED BY A SERGEANT TO THE AREA TO CALM THINGS DOWN.

3. CONFLICT REPORTEDLY BROKE OUT WHEN SERGEANT WAS ATTEMPTING TO SPEAK TO GROUP OF BELLIGERENT CAMPESINOS WHO ATTACKED HIM AND HIS MEN WHILE HE WAS TRYING TO SPEAK. ENSUING FIGHT RESULTED IN 6 MILITARY POLICEMEN AND 11 CAMPESINOS KILLED AND AN AS YET UNDETERMINED NUMBER WOUNDED.

4. ARMY RESPONDED TO SITUATION BY SENDING IN DETACHMENTS FROM ZACAPA, JUTIAPA AND HELICOPTER SUPPORT TEAM FROM THE CAPITAL. TROOPS, WHICH WERE OVERALL COMMAND OF CHIEF OF STAFF GENERAL RIOS MONTT, FOUND AREA CALM, SAW NO SIGNS THAT FURTHER VIOLENCE LIKELY, AND THEY HAVE LARGELY DEPARTED.

5. CHIEF OF STAFF RIOS MONTT TOLD DEFENSE ATTACHE TODAY THAT ROOTS OF PROBLEM LIE IN " ARCHAIC LAND TENURE LAWS" WHICH BADLY NEED REFORMING. HE ALSO LAMENTED THAT ARMY REACTION TO INCIDENT WAS GREATER THAN NEEDED BECAUSE OF ERRONEOUS INFORMATION RECEIVED RE MAGNITUDE OF PROBLEM. HE SAID THERE WERE STORIES OF " HUNDREDS/ AND EVEN " THOUSANDS" OF ARMED CAMPESIONS IN AREA, STORIES WHICH HAD NO VALIDITY. HE PERSONALLY INVESTIGATED VIA HELICOPTER EVERY REPORT OF " ARMED COLUMNS" AND FOUND THEM LIMITED OFFICIAL USE

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ALL TO BE FALSE. HE ALSO LAMENTED FACT THAT PRESS CLAIMED UP TO ARMY 900 TROOPS INVOLVED, WHEN ACTUAL FIGURE WAS LESS THAN 200.

6. COMMENT: WHILE THE CURRENT VIOLENT ERUPTION OF LONG STANDING LAND DISPUTE NOT POLITICALLY MOTIVATED, IT DOES HAVE POLITICAL IMPLICATIONS

WHICH WE WILL BE WATCHING CLOSELY. FOR ONE THING, RIOS
MONTT' S PRIVATE COMMENTS REFLECT ARMY' S UNEASINESS AT BEING
CALLED UPON TO PUT LID ON IN SITUATIONS WHICH IT BELIEVES
STEM FROM FAILURE OF CIVILIAN OFFICIALS TO COME TO GRIPS
WITH SOCIAL ECONOMIC PROBLEMS WHICH CAUSE THESE CONFRONTATIONS
TO ARIS. WE NOTE THAT BASIC PROBLEM HERE STEMS FROM
SITUATION WHERE LARGE AND GROWING NUMBER OF CAMPESINOS ARE
SEEKING, WITH MARGINAL SUCCESS, TO SCRATCH A LIVING
FROM THE MOUNTAIN TOPS, WHILE FERTILE VALLEY LANDS ARE
CONTROLLED BY A RELATIVE FEW IN A LAND TENURE SYSTEM
WHICH INVITES TROUBLE.
BOWDLER

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